NATURE
THE FRONT YARD IS THE STAGE
Where Do You Find the Welcome Mat?

Thurston Woods is a quiet, residential area where ‘city’ and ‘suburb’ blend together. Front yards are places of personalization within a community setting. Our yard work, craft and care are attempts to answer two calls: Who are you? What do you stand for? To reply, we put up signs, create unique entrances and carefully select plants that tell the public about ourselves. The American front yard is a stage, backgrounded by the home and opening onto the street as a stage opens onto an auditorium. We spend hours tending, trimming, mowing, pruning, cleaning, decorating and supervising our little piece of land. It is where nature – flowers, trees, shrubs, stones, earth – is constantly tamed. The lawn is thought of as a place for children to play and summer parties, but it is most often a place to traverse and survey, both with our eyes and with our feet. As we approach a stranger’s house, with each step we feel like we are leaving a public place to enter someone else’s territory. Yet, there are occasional indications that someone inside will be friendly. When we hang signs and flags – “A SuperReader Lives Here” awards, Obama 2012 boards, POW MIA flags, “Pray for Peace” placards, even welcome mats – we are identifying ourselves with a particular group, taking pride in our collective belonging. The yard itself is a sign or a notion that if we craft our yard carefully to a set of social standards, we are good neighbors who add value, both monetary and social, to the street. Our individual actions are for the greater good. Yet, if our lawn is overgrown, if there are weeds, if the paint peels, if holiday decorations are left up too long, if there is no welcome mat, are we bad neighbors? If on our stage, we do not seek a standing ovation, are we shirking an American responsibility?
INVISIBLE ALLEYS

Alley Between 34th and 35th Streets, 5600 Block
Alleys Have No Address

Within Milwaukee, Thurston Woods is an in-between place, part of the city, but far enough from the center to be a suburb. The alleys of Thurston Woods are traces of this, the city's northward push—which was one of the last expansions of the city.

Alleys have no address. They are socially invisible in-between spaces.

We turn our backs to alleys and cut them off at the property lines with fences and hedges. Few windows face alleys. Building facades facing alleys receive less upkeep. In Thurston Woods, alleys indicate the presence of the city; they are places where street paving spreads, garbage trucks come through, and electric poles bring us our much needed energy. It is often perceived as a place of danger, suspicious people and graffiti. Simultaneously, alleys are also a place where youth feel they can escape the eyes of authority—their parents or the police—while they play a forbidden game, curse, or set off fireworks. Alleys are places of no restraint, yet they are zones of high security because they are also a place of storage—garages full of things we do not want to see or to be seen: cars, motorcycles, grills, outdoor equipment, tools, holiday decorations, toys and boxes of forgotten valuables.
**Ghosts**

As we make grand cities, we clear land, pave surfaces and break ground to create foundations. Can we turn back time and recreate nature from once human-dominated plots of land?

Previous human interventions have left their marks in the Havenwoods State Forest. After massive amounts of paving were removed and foundations buried, there still remains ghostly images of the past.

"I dwell in a lonely house I know that vanished many a summer ago, and left no trace but the cellar walls, and a cellar in which the daylight falls."

~ Robert Frost

Angels

As part of its reforestation program, Havenwoods offers opportunities to local school children to plant trees. The kids act as angels responsible for the stewardship of the landscape.

It is important to allow room for nature within our cities. We continuously invite plants, animals and insects back into the cityscape as we attempt to balance human density with local ecosystems.

“For I’d rather be thy child and pupil, in the forest wild, than be the king of men elsewhere.”

~Henry David Thoreau

The resurgence of the prairie and forms of life that inhabit it are signs that nature and the city are not separate entities.

“They are alive and well somewhere; The smallest sprout shows there is really no death, and if ever there was it led forward life.”

~Walt Whitman

Where do you see nature in Thurston Woods? “We see nature all over the place,” according to Lorie Koehler. Many of us see nature in the shady and cool tree-lined streets, the birds in yards and in Havenwoods. But how many of us have thought about how nature here took form and how much of a push and pull there still is between man and nature in the neighborhood?

The landscape of Thurston Woods is man-made, sometimes working with nature and the natural shape and movement of the land, sometimes in conflict. Early maps of the area show the land after the first settlers cleared it of the standing forest: what are now Havenwoods and Berryland are wetlands, much of the remaining space was farm fields. Later, these areas became military installations, veterans’ housing, residences and industrial sites. We have modified nature to suit our needs.

However, nature isn’t passive. Heavy rains flood low lying basements and change the level and quality of Lincoln Creek; lack of rain turns lawns brown. Wildlife is attracted to yards; some species welcome, some, like squirrels at the bird feeder, are not. Plants find a bit of soil and grow through concrete in the alley, or creep up the garage, or erase all but a trace of former Nike missile silos. The push and pull, the tug-of-war, between man and nature continues and is played out in the streets, yards and alleys of Thurston Woods.
In *The Granite Garden*, Ann Whiston Spirn notes that we have viewed nature and the city as two distinct and separate elements rather than nature being "an essential force that permeates the city...the city must be recognized as part of nature and designed accordingly." By seeing and understanding the fundamental connection between nature and neighborhood, each resident can make personal home and yard "design" actions, perhaps taking advantage of the Agape Center's rain barrel program, or giving over a portion of the lawn to native plantings that are drought tolerant, or simply cleaning leaves from a storm sewer come fall. Each small act diminishes the tug-of-war between man and nature.

LAND PLOTS

Mavis and Tom’s Site Plan

John and Mary’s Site Plan

[Diagram of Mavis and Tom’s Site Plan]

[Diagram of John and Mary’s Site Plan]
The Yard as Part of the Home

Looking at the two site plans at left, a viewer can clearly see differences in how homeowners choose to organize and use their outdoor space. Priorities and interests are highlighted in the arrangement of a back yard.

Mavis uses her yard as a public space where she hosts her guests. She has ensured that every inch of her backyard looks beautiful, inviting, warm and cozy. The space is somewhat formal and organized into separate areas, almost rooms, through the double lot yard. Mavis focuses on her guests’ relaxing experience.

In contrast, John and Mary’s backyard is more of an extension of the private areas of their home and they use it as such. The yard must cater to their dog and son. Therefore, this space has been designed with the family in mind: examples include a chain link fence with child-proof locks and a patio made of brick that can be used for family events.